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Foreign Affairs: Spooks in the Swimming Pool?

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By C. L. SULZBERGER

PARIS—It is a cold war cliche to blame the C.I.A. when things go wrong. Because their very nature condemns them to obscurity and anonymity, intelligence services attract rumors and are incapable of effectively denying them. Thus, C.I.A. "spooks" are often imagined lurking behind disasters ranging from earthquakes to unsuccessful *coups d'état*.

Soviet propaganda makes the most of this situation. Whenever a particularly ugly mess occurs in almost any corner of the world, Moscow spreads word that it is the C.I.A.'s fault. Since few people would believe a C.I.A. denial, our most secret organization becomes a useful target for those who wish to smear the United States.

The Algeria Insurrection

In 1961, when a group of French generals in Algeria led an uprising against President de Gaulle, word was soon spread that the C.I.A. was behind the insurrection. Even the reputable Paris newspaper Le Monde wrote: "It appears well established that American agents more or less encouraged Maurice Challe" who headed the rebellion.

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There was no truth in this but insidious rumors are difficult to quash. As a matter of fact, that particular report—like many others—was originated and disseminated by the Russians. It was first printed in the official Soviet newspaper Izvestia, then embellished and spread by the Polish press attaché in Paris, and eventually was published in respectable journals here. Some Frenchmen still believe the C.I.A. sponsored the abortive 1961 putsch.

Now again the French gossip mart is delightedly spreading the tale that the C.I.A. is involved in France's current number one scandal, the Ben Barka affair. Mehdi Ben Barka, a left-wing Moroccan politician, was kidnapped here last October and almost surely murdered. Investigation has shown that agents of S.D.E.C.E., France's equivalent of the C.I.A., were active in the crime.

The Ben Barka affair has embarrassed de Gaulle and poisoned French relations with Morocco. It has also advertised unsavory aspects of S.D.E.C.E., an organization known in the argot as the "swimming pool." S.D.E.C.E. officials have been exposed as corrupt grafters and associates of criminals. As a result of these sordid disclosures, the general in charge of S.D.E.C.E. was fired and the agency, which conducts French espionage and counter-espionage operations, has been placed directly under the Defense Minister.

Not Enough Scandal

This should have been scandal enough for the scandal-loving French public—abduction, torture, probable assassination; a potpourri of French thugs and professional spies. But it wasn't; somebody had to bring in the poor old C.I.A.

Ben Barka was kidnapped from a famous Paris restaurant Oct. 29 and apparently died two days later. On Nov. 1 the initial reports of his disappearance were printed. One day later Communist propaganda went to work on the C.I.A.

On Nov. 2 a Cuban Communist named Mario Kuchilan claimed on Havana television: "The long arm of C.I.A. has acted in Paris, using two false policemen and a Magia gang" to do away with Ben Barka. Nov. 3 this hypothesis was developed by a Moroccan daily, Al Muharir.

By Nov. 5 the story had been sufficiently embroidered to be picked up by Notre Republique, Gaullist party organ. The question was asked—and the answer begged: "Ben Barka: Are the U.S. intelligence services implicated?" Gaullists would obviously be happy to find a foreign scapegoat for a politically embarrassing affair.

On Nov. 12 Minute—a Paris weekly — indirectly involved "American agents." On Nov. 14 the Algiers correspondent of Havana's Prensa Latina, claimed there was evidence of C.I.A. "complicity." A few days later the Nouvel Observateur, reported (quite untruly) that de Gaulle had attributed the crime to the C.I.A.

Not the Work of C.I.A.

The C.I.A. has on occasion been involved in other messes but it had nothing to do with this affair. The American Government could not possibly hope to gain by Ben Barka's disappearance. Obviously France's most secret organization, one of whose primary tasks is to weed out foreign agents, isn't run by the C.I.A. S.D.E.C.E. itself was up to the ears in the crime. The "swimming pool" has been exposed as an unsavory organization. But it isn't filled with American spooks.

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